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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A wild weekend in sports
JUNE 8, 2009

It was one of those weekends of sports gluttony, especially if you were fixated on a television set, intent on catching every bit of drama you could find. And indeed there was much to find. Hockey, basketball, tennis, golf, NASCAR, baseball, horse racing, and who knows how much else if you have access to the worldwide network of sports channels available from every corner of the universe. As for me, this weekend was extraordinarily full of sport as I was a bit under the weather and looking for escape from the realities of physical irritation.

I watched a bit of every item on the enumerated list above except for NASCAR which I must avoid when I have a headache. It was tennis and horse racing that I found most captivating, even though watching the Detroit Red Wings skate circles around the Pittsburgh Slashers was hypnotic, and watching the Lakers' star being possessed by the devil was intriguing.

It was a Jim McKay weekend, with lots of "joy of victory and agony of defeat" moments. Starting on the clay courts of Roland Garros Stadium in Paris on Sunday morning the joy of victory was most pronounced. Roger Federer, who had never won a Grand Slam on clay, rolled to a straight sets win over Robin Soderling, whose game didn't arrive on court until the second set. This made Federer only the sixth man in tennis history to win all of the Grand Slam events in a career and like Andre Agassi he did it on three different surfaces.

Federer has now won fourteen Grand Slams to match the total of Pete Sampras for the most in history, and can claim the title that many were using for him today: "The Greatest Tennis Player in History." Pete Sampras never won a Slam on clay, and Federer won his fourteen much faster than Sampras. In addition Federer has been in fifteen of the last Grand Slam Finals, an incredible level of excellence.

Part of the overwhelming joy of victory for Federer came from the fact that he failed to win in Paris ten times previously, and has lost the last three finals to Rafael Nadal. Some, perhaps even Federer, thought his chances at the French Open were gone in the whirlwind that is Nadal on the baseline. This year, however, the fates turned as Nadal lost to Soderling in the round of sixteen, and other possible challengers such as

Andy Murray and Nikolay Davydenko did not survive long enough to threaten Federer's dream. The stars and the stars of tennis were well-aligned for Roger during the last fortnight.

Some may say that Federer got lucky and that he really didn't earn the title. That is like saying that when someone wins the World Series and doesn't beat the Yankees it shouldn't count. Roger Federer did what he had to do. He won every match of the tournament, and the fact that Nadal and others did not, takes nothing away from "the Greatest Men's Tennis player in the History of the Game."

The tears that came down Roger's cheeks at the end were a joy to witness, as have been all the wonderful hours of tennis that Roger Federer has given tennis fans over the course of his fabulous career. The fact that he is a gracious winner, and a gracious loser, only adds to the luster of his achievements.

On Saturday the agony of defeat was on display on the same court. Dinara Safina lost to her fellow Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova in straight sets. The twenty-three year old came to the French Open ranked number one, but in her previous two Grand Slam finals she failed to win a set, a feat she replicated against Kuznetsova ending with the match with a double-fault. In their previous five meetings Safina had won four. It would have been difficult to convince anyone of that, if all they had seen was Saturday's match.

Unforced errors, double-faults, horrible serves, and an on-going painful exchange of glances and words between Safina and her coach Zeljko Krajan, who was in the stands, produced as painful a sight on a tennis court as I can ever remember. Safina looked like a servant pleading for mercy and assistance from a cruel master, only to find rejection and disgust in response. When the match ended Safina was in tears and looked emotionally and physically crushed. Her body language couldn't possibly have conveyed more agony in her defeat.

Also on Saturday horse racing offered up some wild mixed emotions at the track in Elmont, New York, at the running of the Belmont Stakes. In a strange twist Mine That Bird, winner of the Kentucky Derby finished third at the Belmont after finishing second at the Preakness, thus going 1-2-3 in the Triple Crown races. Calvin Borel, who won on Mine That Bird in the Derby, and won the Preakness on-board Rachel Alexandra, came to Belmont to try to get a different kind of Triple Crown riding Mine That Bird once again.

That didn't happen, and many felt Borel made some bad decisions in the race, opening it up for Kent Desormeaux aboard Summer Bird. For Desormeaux it was a particularly sweet victory after last year's debacle on Big Brown and his loss of a Triple Crown by a nose on Real Quiet in 1998. That year Desormeaux was criticized for starting his run too early, the same charge leveled against Borel on Saturday.

Desormeaux's joy of victory then had an element of redemption, and it completed his racing resume much as The French Open completed Federer's tennis resume, as Desormeaux had never won the third leg of the Triple Crown.

Calvin Borel showed no signs of the agony of defeat, but there must have been at least a twinge of regret at the end of the day. Borel, however, would never have been in the position he was in, unless he had taken Mine That Bird on his improbable 50-1 win at Churchill Downs. Perhaps Borel has created a new Triple Crown achievement. Call it the Calvin Borel Triple Crown Trifecta.

All in all it would have been a wild weekend, even without the Tiger run and the NBA overtime game to end the evening.

Best of all there's always more ahead.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you (and LeBron) that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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